DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 375 UD 030 303

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TITLE Project Blend 1993-94.
INSTITUTION New York City Board of Education, Brooklyn, NY. Office of Educational Research.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 30p.
AVAILABLE FROM Office of Educational Research, 110 Livingston Street, Room 740, Brooklyn, NY 11201.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperation; *High Schools; High School Students; Interpersonal Relationship; Mainstreaming; Nontraditional Education; Program Evaluation; Program Improvement; *Regular and Special Education Relationship; *Socialization; *Special Education; Urban Schools; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS New York City Board of Education; *Project BLEND NY; *Reverse Mainstreaming

ABSTRACT

Project Blend, initiated in 1988, is a collaborative effort between the superintendencies of Alternative High Schools/Special Programs and Citywide Programs of the New York City public school system. The program brings general education students into facilities that serve only special education students. This reverse mainstreaming allows academically-able special education students the opportunity to take credit courses toward a high school diploma, while general education students can take credit-bearing vocational courses, and both groups learn to relate in ways that promote interpersonal skills. In 1993-94, the project was located at three schools. Evaluation that year found that the co-mingling of the two populations was minimal within the instructional program for a variety of practical reasons, but that blending of the two groups did occur in assemblies, field trips, intramurals, and leadership classes in which alternative high school students served as teacher assistants. The positive effects of this socialization were noted in the recommendations for program continuation, which stress clear definition of goals, increased collaboration, and a less restrictive atmosphere. An appendix summarizes outcomes in table form. (SLD)

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OER Report

Project Blend 1993-94

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Project Blend 1993-94

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Blend, initiated in 1988 with a $125,000 planning grant from the Aaron Diamond Foundation, is a collaborative effort between the superintendencies of Alternative High Schools/Special Programs (Division of High Schools), and Citywide Programs (District 75 Special Education) designed to meet the academic, emotional, and vocational needs of students from both superintendencies in the same school building. It is a design for inclusion by "reverse mainstreaming"--bringing general education students into facilities that serve only special education students. It seeks to provide academically able special education students the opportunity to take credit-bearing academic courses leading to a local high school diploma, general education students the chance to take credit-bearing vocational courses, and both groups of students the opportunity to relate to each other in ways that promote their interpersonal skills.

The project is currently located at three sites: the Queens School for Career Development, the Bronx School for Career Development, and the Anna M. Kross Center (A.M.K.C.) on Rikers Island (first implemented in fall 1993).

The 1993-94 evaluation by the Office of Educational Research (OER) found that the co-mingling of the two student populations at the Queens and Bronx sites within the context of the instructional program was minimal. Reasons for this included the limited availability of space for alternative high school students in vocational courses and their general dislike of the more constrained atmosphere of the special education school; and that few special education students took academic courses leading to a diploma, and those who did were unable to complete the coursework.

Nevertheless, "blending" of the two groups did occur in a variety of other ways, including assembly programs, intramural teams, field trips, and leadership classes in which alternative high school students served as teachers' assistants in special education classes. School administrators, staff, and students perceived these interactions as beneficial, citing opportunities for students to get to know people different from themselves, and for non-disabled youngsters to see their disabled peers as individuals rather than as "labels." While respondents did not elaborate on the benefits of increased socialization for special education students, they did allude to the advantages for all students of a school setting which more truly reflected the diverse society in which they live.

The relationship between school administrators and staff of the two student populations at both the Queens and Bronx sites was viewed as collegial but not truly collaborative. They tended

to cooperate informally and only for specific events or activities. Except for Rikers Island, where the staff of both schools did share curricular materials and develop lesson plans jointly (in preparation for integrated course offerings next year), collaboration between alternative high school and special education staff on issues central to the project's integrated learning objectives was not widespread. In addition, staff development, which addressed a wide variety of instructional and administrative issues, did not deal directly with topics that would support the project's goal of providing integrated learning experiences for alternative and special education high school students.

Based on the findings presented in this report, OER makes the following recommendations:

- Central administrators must decided whether to move this project forward thereby providing a less restrictive environment for the SIE IV, VII and VIII students while increasing their access to coursework leading to a diploma;

- Consideration must be given to fostering more complete collaboration between general education and special education staff with regard to planning mainstream shared instructional activities as well as extra-curricular activities;

- A space analysis of each building housing a Blend site should be undertaken by the Division of School Facilities, with a view toward providing additional space for main-stream, special education-regular education Blend offerings, and the allocation of space in each building should be incorporated into the goals and implementation design of each Blend site;

- Staff development activities must include both special education and general education staff so that school climate and culture can evolve into a community of shared values and goals concerning, among other things, the academic potentials of both student populations; and

- In order to test the hypothesis that District 75 special education students may benefit from, and succeed at, general education instruction, a transitional class should be established at each Blend site, thereby allowing special education students to pursue "regular high school work," in the company of general education students.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared by the Office of Educational Research High School Evaluation Unit (OER/H.S.E.U.) of the Board of Education of the City of New York under the overall guidance of Dr. Lori Mei, Evaluation Manager. Sally Renfro conducted background research, interviews with key participants, and wrote parts of the report. Eleanor Freiser developed evaluation instruments, made site visits, and interviewed school-based participants. Judith Eisler was also an author of the report.

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I. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Project Blend is a response to State Education Department concerns about the segregation of certain special education students, specifically those designated as in need of Specialized Instructional Environments (SIE), into separate school facilities and into a course of study that does not lead to a diploma.* This practice is problematic for several reasons. First, it is at odds with the spirit if not the letter of the law governing the educational treatment of children with disabilities.** Both state and federal law require school districts to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, that is, to the maximum extent possible with students who do not have disabilities. Second, Part 100 of the Regulations of the New York State Commissioner of Education states that all students, including those with disabilities, are to have access to programs that lead to a diploma.***

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* Special Instructional Environments (SIE) programs are geared toward bringing students to as near age/grade-appropriate levels as possible, increasing independent functioning and returning students to a less restrictive setting.

** See Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, formerly Education of the Handicapped Act, as amended, 20 U.S.C.A. Sec. 1400 et seq. See also New York Education Law, Sec. 4401 -4410 and Part 200 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education (8 NYCRR Sec. 200).

*** There are three types of high school diplomas granted in New York State: Regents, local, and Individual Educational Plan (IEP). While the Regents and local diplomas require students to pass certain tests and courses, the IEP diploma requires students to complete 12 years of school by age 21 and to have completed the goals in the IEP. See 8 NYCRR Sec. 100 et seq.

By law, a school district's Committee on Special Education (CSE), in consultation with the parent, and when suitable the child, must develop an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) before a child enters a special education program. The IEP must be appropriate to meet the child's unique needs and must take place in the least restrictive environment. In addition, to ensure that children with disabilities have access to free and appropriate programs, the school district must provide a continuum of alternate educational placements to meet the changing needs of children with disabilities.* At one end of this continuum are special education students in the least restrictive environment--they attend regular education classes but have supplemental aids and services available to them. Midway in the continuum are students "mainstreamed" into regular classes for part of the school day but who receive supplemental services in separate "resource rooms" or "self-contained" classrooms. At the other end of the continuum are the most restrictive environments--totally segregated classrooms or segregated school facilities.

In the New York City public school system the special education continuum offers high school-aged students with disabilities two instructional programs: Basic 1 leading to a local high school diploma; and Basic 2 a non-diploma program providing basic skills development with an emphasis on career

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* See 20 U.S.C.A. Se. 1401 (a)(20), 1412(5)(B); 1414(a)(1)(c)(vi); See also 34 C.F.R. Secs. 300.343-346; 300.550 and 8 NYCRR Sec. 200.4.

education and vocational training. Basic 1 students attend regular high schools (administered by the Division of High Schools) while Basic 2 students attend separate special education schools (administered by Citywide/District 75 Special Education Programs). Typically, SIE students are enrolled in the Basic 2 program and placed in the most restrictive environment in the continuum--segregated school facilities--thus having no opportunity to interact with their non-disabled peers. Project Blend was designed to address this issue by bringing general education students, enrolled in alternative school programs, into special education facilities.

The superintendents of Alternative High Schools and Programs (Division of High Schools) and Citywide Programs (Division of Special Education) created Project Blend. The synergism was apparent. First, alternative programs have reduced class size approaching that mandated for special education classes' teacher/pupil ratio. Second, a number of alternative high schools had successfully mainstreamed special education students into a variety of programs and in some instances had succeeded in decertifying or recertifying a number of these students. Third, it was believed that in a number of curricular areas, for example, art, music and vocational education, the needs of alternative high school students and special education students were similar--whether due to a handicapping condition or to an inability to function in traditional high school settings--which would allow for easy blending of the two student

populations. Finally, an analysis showed that Citywide Program schools had sufficient space to accommodate general education students.

The proposal was elegant in its simplicity: Create a less restrictive environment for SIE students by establishing alternative high school programs within special education facilities. Through "reverse mainstreaming" that is, bringing general education students into the special education facility, Project Blend would create a less restrictive environment. Citywide Programs could move students into "mainstream" classes for at least part of the school day. Project Blend schools would offer three educational options:

- Self-contained special education classes for SIE IV, SIE VII and SIE VIII students;
- Academic/alternative classes including (1) basic literacy, (2) General Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation, and (3) general education classes for alternative education students; and
- Shared offerings intended to service both student populations, i.e., performing arts, vocational education and physical education.

It seemed both groups of students would benefit by the restructuring of the SIE schools. By establishing on-site alternative high schools, SIE students could, where appropriate, be mainstreamed into general education classes. At the same time, there would be more space with attendant vocational shops available for alternative school programs. But most importantly,

SIE students would have an opportunity to interact with their non-disabled peers.

Due to budgetary constraints, the superintendents sought outside funding for planning and staff development activities. The Aaron Diamond Foundation provided a $125,000.00 planning grant and program development activities began at three sites in September of 1988.

Although Project Blend was in its sixth year of operation during the 1993-94 school year, it had yet to be fully implemented. This was due, in part, to personnel changes. There have been, for example, three superintendents of Citywide Programs, three Chancellors and two interim acting Chancellors since the project's inception. Needless to say, with each new administration, policies were revised, priorities changed, administrative drift set in, innovations meandered. Between its start-up year (1988-89) and the 1993-94 school year, Blend opened and closed two sites--one in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan.* The project is currently located at three sites: the Queens and Bronx Schools for Career Development and the Anna M. Kross Center (A.M.K.C.) on Rikers Island.**

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* The Brooklyn site was closed because of school security problems. The Manhattan site was closed because the SIE students were too young to participate in secondary school programs.

** The A.M.K.C. site opened in October of 1993 and is unique because it serves a prison population. Project Blend is a collaboration with P.S. 25, an on-site special education school operating in the prison under the auspices of District 75 (Division of Special Education). P.S. 25 serves the special education population incarcerated at A.M.K.C. Project Blend offers a GED preparation and testing program to interested

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The Division of High Schools asked the Office of Educational Research (OER) to prepare a status report on Project Blend. Evaluation methodology included a review of documents, site visits, and interviews. All school administrators (the three building principals of the host special education schools and the three Project Blend directors), eight alternative school staff members, nine students (including one special education student), five parents of alternative education students and a director of a group home that refers students to the project were interviewed. In addition, teachers of alternative school students completed OER data retrieval forms. (This information is summarized in an appendix.) Special education teachers were not asked to complete such forms because no blending per se occurred. According to Blend staff and administrators, the few special education student referrals to general education classes were not timely enough for students to fulfill course requirements for academic credit.

SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

The genesis of Project Blend and the methodology used in evaluating it during the 1993-94 school year are presented in Chapter I. Findings are discussed in Chapter II, and conclusions and recommendations are offered in Chapter III.

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inmates.

II. FINDINGS

INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS

Although Project Blend sought to incorporate the social and academic activities of special education SIE IV, VII, and VIII students with those of general education alternative high school students in order to create a unique learning environment for the mutual benefit of both, evaluators found that within the context of the instructional program minimal shared instruction occurred.*

Evaluators found that alternative education students had limited access to vocational shops. According to District 75 administrators this was because most of the available space was allotted to special education students for whom these courses were required. Concurrently, it was reported that the general education students, who are accustomed to the more flexible atmosphere of the alterative school setting, dislike the stricter rules and regulations that characterized the special education classes; consequently they did not register for the vocational shops. One notable exception was the cosmetology course offered at the Queens site; the teacher was not a member of the special education staff and was hired with funds provided by Project Blend.

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* It should be noted that no integration of students was expected at the Rikers Island site during 1993-94 since this year was devoted primarily to planning.

Secondly, few special education students took credit-bearing general education courses, and of those who did, none successfully completed the course work. Alternate school personnel attributed this to the fact that SIE students were not referred in a timely enough manner to fulfill course requirements.

Administrators and staff of Project Blend indicated some confusion when asked to explain the apparent lack of "blending" of the two student populations. At one site, for example, District 75 administrators repeatedly offered to locate and refer SIE IV, VII or VIII youngsters they believed could profit from mainstream offerings; in more than three years, however, not one referral had taken place. Project Blend staff also cited instances in which individual special education teachers had sought information about the program and expressed the belief that they had, in their classes, youngsters suitable for referral; none of those students, however, subsequently were referred to the general education offerings available in the Blend program.

Likewise, Blend teachers reported that individual vocational teachers at both sites had expressed a willingness, even an eagerness, to have general education students in their classes. Yet, Blend administrators reported that efforts to include general education students in such classes on a routine, systematic basis, were unsuccessful. In one instance, for example, when seats became available in some vocational shops at

one site, they were filled with multiply handicapped, autistic students who may not have been able to benefit substantially from the placements.

Finally, on-site Blend administrators, as well as the central administrators of Blend, were unable to explain why programming options originally included in the collaboratively-developed plan for Blend had not been implemented. Options such as team teaching (whereby a general education teacher would accompany her/his students to special education vocational classes thus preserving student-teacher ratios), or allowing regular-education licensed teachers to hold classes in shop rooms, with special education students mainstreamed into those classes, seemed to Blend personnel, to be consistently rejected by on-site special education personnel. As noted, in only one instance--Queens Blend--in which the alternative high school program unilaterally established such a class and then voluntarily accepted placement of special education students in it, did such programming exist.

Despite the lack of formal blending, however, the two student populations did blend in other ways. They attended assemblies, student council meetings and after-school programs together, and played together on inter-mural teams. In addition, alternative high school students participated in leadership classes in which they served as teachers' assistants in special education classes.

All Blend administrators, staff, and students interviewed for this report perceived these interactions as beneficial. They cited opportunities for students to get to know people different from themselves and for non-disabled youngsters to see their disabled peers as individuals rather than as "labels." Some expressed the belief that socializing between the two groups led to heightened sensitivity and greater understanding of the problems faced by people with disabilities. As one teacher put it, co-mingling contributed to "demystifiying their (general education students) interpretation of special education students." In addition, the experience of working with special education students in the classroom fostered in those Blend students who were teachers' assistants "a sense of responsibility and improved self-esteem," according to one school administrator. The words of the students themselves testify to the value of the experience:

- "I learned that even though they have 'mental problems,' they're real smart...I was surprised by the quality these students have."
- "I learned that they are regular people like me but might have a problem."
- "I don't understand why they're labeled special ed.--they're just like us."

COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOL STAFFS

The relationship between the school administrators and staff of the two student populations, that is on-site District 75 personnel and Alternative School personnel, at both the Queens and Bronx sites was viewed as collegial but not truly

collaborative. Individual staff members tended to cooperate on an informal basis and for specific purposes--e.g., planning joint ventures like the cosmetology and driver's education courses, sharing information to facilitate student job placements, and discussing the responsibilities of the teacher assistant in special education classes. Cooperation also occurred in coordinating special school programs and events such as school safety plans, conflict resolution training and drug prevention activities. Except for Rikers Island, however, where staff of both schools did share curricular materials and developed lesson plans jointly in preparation for integrated course offerings next year, collaboration was not widespread.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

There were no staff development activities that included both special education teachers and general education teachers save the orientation provided by the Department of Corrections to all staff at the Rikers Island site. Staff development, however, was provided to general education teachers at all three Blend sites. The activities involved a wide range of instructional and administrative issues, including family group curriculum, alternative assessment and adapting lesson plans to meet students' needs. In addition, Educators for Social Responsibility, a community-based organization, led a training session in conflict resolution.

Overall, staff development did not appear to address directly issues that would support the project's goal of

providing integrated learning experiences for alternative and special education high school students. The staff developer, in fact, noted the need for better articulation between the host schools and the alternative high schools.

PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT

School Administrators and Staff

Generally, Project Blend administrators and staff believed that both groups of students benefited from the diversity of the school setting which reflected the "real world" and "added energy to the school" even though opportunities for "blending" were restricted to relatively few students. Blend teachers and administrators noted that there were fundamental differences concerning educational philosophy between themselves and the special education staff. These differences were manifested in school climate and culture. On the one hand, special education involves schools where control and rigidity are the focal points. Alternative education, on the other hand, takes place in a flexible classroom setting in which cooperation and collaboration between students and teachers are emphasized. Needless to say, the values, assumptions, and perspectives of these two very disparate views on how to structure schools and classes led to a lack of "blending" between the two professional groups.

The alternative school staff characterized their approach to learning by noting the one-to-one relationship with students, staff commitment and willingness to experiment with innovative methods of teaching and to "advocate" for students, the reality-

oriented curriculum, and the sense of "community." One teacher said that "teaching and learning were less stressful" in the small school setting, where students "feel cared about." One family assistant commented on the outreach to parents--about both students' problems and successes--and efforts to facilitate their participation in the school, as well as the assistance provided in dealing with parent-student relationships and other personal problems.

Parents

Because there was minimal blending of students, OER interviewed only parents of alternative school students. Those parents, however, were unanimously enthusiastic about the school. They had enormous praise for the staff whom they perceived as "committed" and "patient," and sincerely concerned about their child's welfare. Some commented on the close personal relationships that existed between their childern and the staff, and between themselves and school staff. Several talked about the involvement of parents in the school--e.g., attendance at conflict resolution workshops, the organization of support groups, and the development of a crisis intervention program (as a focus for a newly emerging parent group). For some parents, safety was an important consideration, and the fact that their childern felt safe at the school was another reason for their positive assessment of it. A few parents noted that their childern were happier and performing better than at previous schools.

Parents also discussed the benefits of Family Group.* One parent said, "Family Group is a good idea because it gives my daughter another view of dealing with people," while another observed that her child was learning to "express herself and 'act out' problems in group."

Below are some of the parents' most poignant remarks about the school and what it means to them and their children:

- "I love the school; they have patience to help him through--let him take his time to grow, have faith in him."
- "It's more like a private school; they get to know you as a person, not a number."
- "It meets my expectations--they are in constant contact, on a first-name basis, children feel connected, staff is top notch."
- "My daughter came a long way since she came here. She was either going to be saved or lost; they helped save her. They work with you."

The director of the referring group home agreed with the positive assessment by parents, adding that "children develop a positive self-image and sense of self-worth--that they can learn." She also viewed the curriculum and how it is taught positively: "The subject matter is geared to the interests of children," and "learning in segments (the cycle system) motivates children."

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* Family Group is an alternative education curriculum innovation which provides personal and academic support through group discussions about real life issues. Students attend the class throughout their high school careers.

Students

The opinions of the general education students parallel those expressed by their parents and school staff. They valued the personal attention they got from teachers, who were readily available and whom they perceived as "friends" as well as teachers. Some believed that students were more serious abut their schoolwork and got along better with each other, which they attributed in part to the small school and class size. Many noted that they liked Project Blend schools better than others they had attended, felt better about themselves, and were in fact doing better--both academically and in their interpersonal relationships. One student, commenting on his use of the conflict resolution skills he'd learned in class at a town meeting convened to deal with a problem affecting the entire school, noted the relevance of things taught in school: "They relate their teaching to our lives in the street."

They credited Family Group with helping them to develop a sense of trust, helping them to solve their problems and become more confident in themselves, and motivating them to attend school. One student said that this class "helped me realize that everybody has problems and we can relate more;" another observed that "...it makes school more 'real'."

Comments by their students also demonstrate their positive assessment of their experience at Project Blend schools, overall:

- "Teachers see each child as an individual."

- "This school is more personal, easier to get along in a small group; they give more attnetion, help you."
- "...I'm closer to fellow students--we're like a family."
- "Students don't act ridiculous--they come to class to work."
- "I no longer cut, I do more schoolwork. I like school, especially conflict resolution class. I feel better about myself. I have found out I have a mind -- I'm not a stupid kid."

PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECT IMPROVEMENT

Recommendations by administrators and staff for improving the project focused on greater collaboration between alternative school and special education staff, increased access to vocational shops for alternative school students, and more careful selection of special education students for participation in general education classes. Other needs cited were more space to expand the number of course offerings and increase the number of students who can take them, greater access to computers and libraries. The Bronx site requested a physical education teacher. Some parents acknowledged the need for even greater participation on the part of parents.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the 1993-94 school year, Project Blend offered few mainstreaming opportunities to special education students because site-based special education administrators had not yet fully embraced the Blend concept. OER found little "blending" of general education and special education students in the classrooms at the Project Blend sites.

Few special education students took credit-bearing academic courses, and those who did were unable to meet the course requirements. General education students had limited access to vocational courses and generally disliked the more circumscribed climate found in special education settings. Nevertheless, social interactions between the two student populations--e.g., during extra-curricular activities and when alternative school students served as teachers' assistants in special education classrooms--proved to be important opportunities for personal growth and heightened understanding and respect for those with disabilities. While respondents elaborated on the benefits of increased socialization for special education students, they also alluded to the advantages that diverse populations bring to a school setting.

For the alternative school population, opportunities for social and emotional development were also evident in Family Group. This class afforded students the time to deal with a wide range of academic and personal issues in a nurturing environment.

It was a place where students learned to trust others and to share, where they learned that they were not alone in the problems they faced.

On-site alternative education staff had mixed feelings about the school climate. They reported, for example, having questions about how classroom space was allocated and used. While general education teachers reported their classrooms were used throughout each day--with some teachers at each site required to "float" among classrooms--they noted that some classrooms dedicated to special education personnel in each site appeared to be under-utilized, used as few as two or three periods a day for instruction. Individual special education personnel involved in counseling functions, for example, retained full-size classrooms for their use. Even when a given teacher's students were outside of the school in work experience programs, the classrooms tended to be unavailable for use by regular education students and their teachers.

At both the Bronx and Queens sites the two staffs work cooperatively but not collaboratively--i.e., they share information and planned a limited number of activities together but did not engage in ongoing professional development. Unfortunately, there were no discussions about the underlying philosophy of the project. No strategies were developed to increase the likelihood of a successful integrated learning experience for students. While there are similarities between the student populations, there appear to be important differences

between the capabilities and needs of these groups. These differences must be explored if opportunities for shared learning situations are to be optimized.

In fact, there appear to be differing and contradictory views about the academic potentials of SIE IV, VII, and SIE VIII students. When interviewed, many general education staff members reported that they were convinced that numerous students in each of the District 75 schools could benefit from enhanced opportunities for mainstream instruction. They also reported, however, that special education staff, and administrators in particular, repeatedly questioned students' abilities and potential. A proposal to establish a "transitional program," targeted at specific students who appeared, to general education staff, to be suited for the program, enabling both schools' staff to evaluate students' performance, has been made, but District 75 site administrators have maintained that there is "no space" for such a classroom.

Based on the findings presented in this report, OER therefore makes the following recommendations:

- Central administrators must decided whether to move this project forward thereby providing a less restrictive environment for the SIE IV, VII and VIII students while increasing their access to coursework leading to a diploma;

- Consideration must be given to fostering more complete collaboration between general education and special education staff with regard to planning mainstream shared instructional activities as well as extracurricular activities;

- A space analysis of each building housing a Blend site should be undertaken by the Division of School Facilities, with a view toward providing additional space for mainstream, special education-regular education Blend offerings, and the allocation of space in each building should be incorporated into the goals and implementation design of each Blend site;

- Staff development activities must include both special education and general education staff so that school climate and culture can evolve into a community of shared values and goals concerning, among other things, the academic potentials of both student populations; and

- In order to test the hypothesis that District 75 special education students may benefit from, and succeed at, general education instruction, a transitional class should be established at each Blend site, thereby allowing special education student to pursue "regular high school work," in the company of general education students.

APPENDIX

Summary of Outcome Data for General Education Students at Two Blend Sites

Variable	Bronx	Queens	Combined
Average Age	16.8	17.6	17.2
Average months in program	14.1	16.5	15.6
Average credits earned	5.3	9.7	7.4
Average attendance	65%	75%	69%
Gender			
Male	42%	38%	40%
Female	58%	62%	60%
Number served	148	139	287

- On average, general education students at the two Blend sites were about 17 years old, and remained in the program for about a year and a quarter.